Long Live The King

By MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

"Madame will retire?"

"You little fool! You know what I am ready for!"

The maid stood still. Her wide, bovine eyes, filled with alarm, watched the countess as she moved swiftly across the room to her wardrobe. When she turned about again, she held in her hand a thin black riding crop. Minna's ruddy color faded. She knew the Loscheks, knew their furies.

"Madame!" she cried, and fell on her knees. "What have I done? Oh, what have I done?"

"That is what you will tell me," said the countess, and brought down the crop. A livid stripe across the girl's face turned slowly to red.

"I have done nothing, I swear it. Mother of pity, help me! I have done nothing."

The crop descended again, this time on one of the great sleeves of her peasant costume. So thin it was, so brutal the blow, that it cut into the muslin. Groaning, the girl fell forward on her face. The countess con-

"I Have Done Nothing, I Swear It."

tinued to strike pitiless blows into which she put all her fury, her terror, her frayed and ragged nerves.

The girl on the floor, from whimpering, fell to crying hard, with great noiseless sobs of pain and bewilderment. When at last the blows ceased, she lay still.

The countess prodded her with her foot. "Get up," she commanded.

But she was startled when she saw the girl's face. It was she who was the fool. The welt would tell its own story, and the other servants would talk. It was already a deep purple, and swollen. Both women were trembling. The countess, still holding the crop, sat down.

"Now!" she said. "You will tell me to whom you gave a certain small book of which you know."

"I, madame?"

"You."

"But what book? I have given nothing, madame. I swear it."

"Then you admitted some one to this room?"

"No one, madame, except—" She hesitated.

"Well?"

"There came this afternoon the men who clean madame's windows. No one else, madame."

She put her hand to her cheek, and looked furtively to see if her fingers were stained with blood. The countess, muttering, fell to furious pacing of the room. So that was it, of course. The girl was telling the truth. She was too stupid to lie. Then the committee of ten indeed knew everything—had known that she would be away, had known of the window cleaners, had known of the safe, and her possession of the code.

She dismissed the girl and put away the riding crop, then she smoothed the disorder of her hair and dress. The court physician, calling a half hour later, found her reading on a chaise longue in her boudoir, looking pale and handsome, and spent what he considered a pleasant half hour with her.

Then at last he was gone, and she went about her heavy-hearted preparations for the night. From a corner of her wardrobe she drew a long peasant's cape, such a cape as Minna might wear. Over her head, instead of a hat, she threw a gray veil. A careless disguise, but all that was necessary. The sentries through and about the palace were not unaccustomed to such shrouded figures slipping out from its gloom to light, and perhaps to love.

Before she left, she looked about the room. What assurance had she that this very excursion was not a trap, and that in her absence the vault would not be looted again? It contained now something infinitely valuable and incriminating—the roll of film. She glanced about, and seeing a silver vase of roses, hurriedly emptied the water out, wrapped the film in oiled paper, and dropped it down among the stems.

The Street of the Wise Virgins was not near the palace. Even by walking briskly she was in danger of being late. The wind kept her back, too. Then, at last, the Street of the Wise Virgins and the fiacre, standing at the curb, with a driver wrapped in rugs against the cold of the February night, and his hat pulled down over his eyes. The countess stopped beside him.

"You are expecting a passenger?"

"Yes, madame."

With her hand on the door, the countess realized that the fiacre was already occupied. As she peered into its darkened interior, the shadow resolved itself into a cloaked and masked figure. She shrank back.

"Enter, madame," said a voice.

The figure appalled her. It was not sufficient to know that behind the horrifying mask which covered the entire face and head, there was a human figure, human pulses that beat, human eyes that appraised her. She hesitated.

"Quickly," said the voice.

She got in, shrinking into a corner of the carriage. Her lips were dry, the reading of terror was in her ears. The door closed.

Then commenced a drive of which afterward the countess dared not think. The figure neither moved nor spoke. Inside the carriage reigned the most complete silence. Then the carriage stopped, and at last the shrouded figure moved and spoke.

"I regret, countess, that my orders are to blindfold you."

She submitted ungracefully, while he bound a black cloth over her eyes. He drew it very close and knotted it behind. In the act his fingers touched her face, and she felt them cold and clammy. The contact sickened her.

"Your hand, madame."

She was led out of the carriage, and across soft earth, a devious course again, as though they avoided small obstacles. Once her foot touched something low and hard, like marble. Again, in the darkness, they stumbled over a mound. She knew where she was, then—in a graveyard. But which? There were many about the city.

An open space, the opening of a gate or door that squeaked softly, a flight of steps that led downward, and a breath of musty, cold air, damp and cellarlike.

At last, still in unbroken silence, she knew that they had entered a large space. Their footsteps no longer echoed and reechoed. Her guide walked more slowly, and at last paused, releasing her hand. She felt again the touch of his clammy fingers as he untied the knots of her bandages. He took it off.

At first she could see little. When her eyes grew accustomed, she made out the scene slowly.

A great stone vault, its walls broken into crypts which had contained caskets of the dead. But the caskets had been removed, and were piled in a corner, and in the niches were rifles. In the center was a pine table, curiously incongruous, and on it writing materials, a cheap clock, and a pile of documents. There were two candles only, and these were stuck in skulls—old brown skulls so infinitely removed from all semblance to the human that they were not even horrible. It was as if they had been used, not to inspire terror, but because they were at hand and convenient for the purpose. In the shadow, ranged in a semicircle, were nine figures, all motionless, all masked, and cloaked in black. They sat, another incongruity, on plain wooden chairs. But in spite of that they were figures of dread. The one who had brought her made the tenth.

Had she not known the past record of the men before her, the rather opera bouffe setting with which they chose to surround themselves might have aroused her scorn. But Olga Loschek knew too much. She guessed shrewdly that, with the class of men with whom they dealt, it was not enough that their name spelled terror. They must visualize it. They had taken their cue from that very church, indeed, beneath which they hid. The church, with its shrines and images, appealed to the eye. They, too, appealed to the eye. Their masks, the carefully constructed and upheld mystery of their identity, the trappings of death about them—it was skillfully done.

Still no one spoke. The countess faced them. Only her eyes showed her nervousness; she stood haughtily, her head held high. But like most women, she could not endure silence for long, at least the silence of shrouded figures and intent eyes.

"Now that I am here," she demanded, "may I ask why I have been summoned?"

It was Number Seven who replied. It was Number Seven who, during the hour that followed, spoke for the others. None moved, or but slightly. Evidently all had been carefully prearranged.

"Look on the table, countess. You will find there some papers you will perhaps recognize."

She took a step toward the table and glanced down. The code book lay there. Also the letter she had sent by Peter Niburg. She made no effort to disclaim them.

"I recognize them," she said clearly.

"Do you realize what will happen,

The Countess Faced Them.

madame, if these papers are turned over to the authorities?"

She shrugged her shoulders. And now Number Seven rose, a tall figure of mystery, and spoke at length in a cultivated, softly intoned voice. The countess, listening, felt the voice vaguely familiar, as were the burning eyes behind the mask.

"It is our hope, madame," he said, "that you will make it unnecessary for the committee of ten to use those papers. We have no quarrel with women. We wish rather a friend than an enemy. The committee of ten, to those who know its motives, has the highest and most loyal of ideals—to the country."

His voice took on a new, almost a fanatic note. They had watched the gradual decay of the country, he said. Its burden of taxation grew greater each year. The masses sweated and toiled, to carry on their backs the dead weight of the aristocracy and the throne. The iron hand of the chancellor held everything; an old king who would die, was dying now, and after that a boy, nominal ruler only, while the chancellor continued his hard rule. And now, as if that were not enough, there was talk of an alliance with Karnia, an alliance which, carried through, would destroy the hope of a republic.

The countess stared.

"The price of the alliance, madame, is the Princess Hedwig in marriage. The committee, which knows all things, believes that you have reason to dislike this marriage."

Save that she clutched her cloak more closely, the countess made no move. But there was a soft stir among the figures. Perhaps, after all, the committee as a whole did not know all things.

"To prevent this alliance, madame, is our first aim. There are others to follow. But"—he bent forward—"the king will not live many days. It is our hope that that marriage will not occur before his death."

By this time Olga Loschek knew very well where she stood. The committee was propitiatory. She was not in danger, save as it might develop. They were, in a measure, putting their case.

"King Karl has broken faith before. He will not support Livonia until he has received his price. He is determined on the marriage."

"A marriage of expediency," said the countess impatiently.

The speaker for the committee shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps," he replied. "Although there are those of us who think that in this matter of expediency, Karl gives more than he receives.

"The matter lies thus, madame. The chancellor is now in Karnia. Doubtless he will return with the agreement signed. We shall learn that in a day or so. We do not approve of this alliance for various reasons, and we intend to take steps to prevent it. The paper itself is nothing. But plainly, countess, we need a friend in the palace, one who is in the confidence of the royal family."

"And for such friendship, I am to secure safety?"

"Yes, madame. But that is not all. Let me tell you briefly how things stand with us. We have, supporting us, certain bodies, workingmen's guilds, a part of the student body, not so much of the army as we would wish. Dissatisfied folk, madame, who would exchange the emblem of tyranny for freedom. On the announcement of the king's death, in every part of the kingdom will go up the cry of liberty. But the movement must start here. The city must rise against the throne. And against that there are two obstacles." He paused. The clock ticked, and water dripped into the tin pail with metallic splashes. "The first is this marriage. The second—is the Crown Prince Ferdinand William Otto."

The countess recoiled. "No!"

"A moment, madame. You think badly of us." Under his mask the countess divined a cold smile. "It is not necessary to contemplate violence. There are other methods. The boy could be taken over the border, and hidden until the republic is firmly established. After that, he is unimportant."

The countess, still pale, looked at him scornfully. "You do my intelligence small honor."

"Where peaceful methods will avail, our methods are peaceful, madame."

"It was, then, in peace that you murdered Prince Hubert?"

"The errors of the past are past." Then, with a new sternness: "Make no mistake. Whether through your agency or another, countess, when the cathedral bell rouses the city to the king's death, and the people wait in the place for their new king to come out on the balcony, he will not come."

The countess was not entirely bad. Standing swaying and white-faced before the tribunal, she saw suddenly the golden head of the little crown prince, saw him smiling as he had smiled that day in the sunlight, saw him troubled and forlorn as he had been when, that very evening, he had left them to go to his lonely rooms. Perhaps she reached the biggest moment of her life then, when she folded her arms and stared proudly at the shrouded figures before her.

"I will not do it," she said.

But Number Seven remained impassive. "A new idea, countess!" he said suavely. "I can understand that your heart recoils. But this thing is inevitable, as I have said. Whether you or another—but perhaps with time to think you may come to another conclusion. We make no threats. Our position is, however, one of responsibility. We are compelled to place the future of the republic before every other consideration."

"That is a threat."

"We remember both our friends and our enemies, madame. And we have only friends and enemies. There is no middle course. If you would like time to think it over—"

"How much time?" She clutched at the words.

"Women vary," said Number Seven mockingly. "Some determine quickly. Others—"

"May I have a month?"

"During which the king may die! Alas, madame, it is now you who do us too little honor!"

"A week?" begged the countess desperately.

The leader glanced along the line. One head after another nodded slowly.

"A week it is, madame. Comrade Five!"

The one who had brought her came forward with the bandage.

"At the end of one week, madame, a fiacre will, as tonight, be waiting in the Street of the Wise Virgins."

"And these papers?"

"On the day the republic of Livonia is established, madame, they will be returned to you."

He bowed, and returned to his chair. Save for the movements of the man who placed the bandage over her eyes, there was absolute silence in the room.

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Prince Ferdinand William Otto was supremely happy. Three quite delightful things had happened. First, Nikky had returned. He said he felt perfectly well, but the crown prince thought he looked as though he had been ill, and glanced frequently at Nikky's cigarette during the riding hour. Second, Hedwig did not come to the riding lesson, and he had Nikky to himself. Third, he, Prince Ferdinand William Otto, was on the eve of a birthday.

This last, however, was not unmixed happiness. For the one day the sentence of exile was to be removed so that he might lunch with the king, and he was to have strawberry jam with his tea, some that Miss Braith-

waite's sister had sent from England. But to offset all this, he was to receive a delegation of citizens.

Hedwig was not at the riding school that morning. This relieved Prince Ferdinand William Otto, whose views as to Nikky were entirely selfish, but Nikky himself had unaccountably lost his high spirit of the morning. He played, of course, as he always did. And even taught the crown prince how to hang over the edge of his saddle, while his horse was cantering, so that bullets would not strike him.

They rode and frolicked, yelled a bit, got two ponies and whacked a polo ball over the tan bark, until the crown prince was sweating royally and was gloriously flushed.

"I don't know when I have been so happy," he said, dragging out his handkerchief and mopping his face. "It's a great deal pleasanter without Hedwig, isn't it?"

(Continued next week).